

1-1-2012

# Residential Grief Camps: An Initial Phenomenological Study of Staff Perspectives

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## Recommended APA Citation

Brown, T. B., & Kimball, T. G. (2012). Residential Grief Camps: An Initial Phenomenological Study of Staff Perspectives. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(1), 78-91. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol17/iss1/3>

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## Residential Grief Camps: An Initial Phenomenological Study of Staff Perspectives

### Abstract

Research has focused primarily on the impact of death on family functioning and the stages and tasks of grief, though little attention has been given to grief camps or the experiences of those who work there. This study explored the experiences of staff at a four-day overnight children's grief camp. Eight participants reported their experience of camp in two major categories: connection to others and independence in grief and five themes. Camp provides the opportunity for campers to connect to others while finding their own path to healing. Clinical implications and future research directions are also discussed.

### Keywords

Grief Camps, Camp Staff, Children's Grief, Phenomenology, Qualitative Research

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## **Residential Grief Camps: An Initial Phenomenological Study of Staff Perspectives**

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*Research has focused primarily on the impact of death on family functioning and the stages and tasks of grief, though little attention has been given to grief camps or the experiences of those who work there. This study explored the experiences of staff at a four-day overnight children's grief camp. Eight participants reported their experience of camp in two major categories: connection to others and independence in grief and five themes. Camp provides the opportunity for campers to connect to others while finding their own path to healing. Clinical implications and future research directions are also discussed. Key Words: Grief Camps, Camp Staff, Children's Grief, Phenomenology, Qualitative Research.*

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Grief and bereavement are a normal aspect of life. As human beings we can anticipate the experience of someone in our life dying, whether it be an expected death or otherwise. Although death is an imminent experience of life, it does not shadow the shock and utter grief that follows the death of a loved one.

Children are not immune to the death of loved ones and adults often assume they need protection from the emotions attached to their grief. It is common for the needs of bereaved children and adolescents not to be properly acknowledged or be understood by many adults (Corr, 1999). As McGoldrick and Walsh (2005) indicate, children often conceal their own grief in order to protect their bereaved parents from more anxiety. The role of grief in family functioning has also been examined, specifically the shift in familial dynamics and gender identity formation (Cait, 2005). The need for programs to assist with parenting and caregiver mental health has also been studied (Sandler et al., 2003). Additionally, Mahon (1999) asserts there is a significant need to explore the secondary loss associated with the death of a parent(s) as bereaved children may be forced to move and adjust to many changes. The literature is dense in providing inquiry into the factors impacting a parentally bereaved child, such as the type of death that occurred (Hope & Hodge, 2006) and the type of parenting (Saldinger, Porterfield, & Cain, 2004).

Historically, children's bereavement has been discussed in a framework that categorizes grief into stages or tasks (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Rando, 1991; Worden, 1991). The stage models point to emotions such as denial and anger and tasks such as acceptance and adjustment. As Goldman (2004) points out, bereaved children do not process their grief in a linear way. The feelings and emotions associated with death may surface at varying degrees and intensity. As Jeffers (2001) argues, stage models do not allow room for grief to be a unique process. Though we benefited from the works of

Kubler-Ross (1969) and others, the stages and process of grief must continue to be examined. Our understanding of death and grief has evolved over time, and our research is not reflecting this growth adequately.

Researchers have sought to compare complicated or traumatic grief to the diagnosis of depression, and to find appropriate ways to treat it (Hogan, Worden, & Schmidt, 2005; Prigerson et al., 1999). Complicated grief is often described as a prolonged sense of mourning or feelings of being “stuck.” Prigerson & Maciejewski (2005) have called for empirical testing of the evaluation criteria for complicated grief in hopes of finding effective treatments. In order to assist mental health professionals from pathologizing behaviors better explained by grief, it is imperative for them to embrace interventions that honor the experiences of grief. Embracing interventions that move away from diagnostic criteria and rigid stages opens room for persons to uniquely mourn.

Most of the research on grief has mainly focused on stage models and the complicated nature of prolonged grief. There still remains an absence of formal investigations regarding the conceptualization of grief (Corr, 2003; Dowdney, 2000). Research is scant in exploring the definition of grief, specifically from the experiences of children or those directly working with children. Hope and Hodge (2006) interviewed social workers and found they agreed on the importance of children being given accurate information about death. These grief professionals further expressed no one grief reaction is better than another, as all children grieve differently. We as professionals interested in helping others mourn successfully could benefit from more studies that explore those working closely with grieving children.

It is important to note that many children have long-term effects from grief, therefore it is imperative to offer meaningful outlets to help navigate this experience while avoiding pathology and other behavioral issues (Kirwin & Hamrin, 2005; Raveis, Siegal, & Karus, 1999; Schmiede et al., 2006). Emerging across the country are grief camps designed for children to help cope with the emotions connected to the death of a loved one. Although these grief camps continue to successfully operate, little research has been conducted to explore the experiences of those working in such camps. The few studies conducted in this area show a beneficial impact on children and families by providing a social network to other grieving families (Creed, Ruffin, & Ward, 2001; Goldman, 2005; Loy, 2000). An Internet search on grief camps revealed most are designed to be day camps or at most an overnight stay. Even though existing research recognizes bereavement camps as a good resource for children and adolescents, empirical data is scarce.

In order to best understand the role of bereavement for children it is necessary to gain insight into the experiences of those working directly with those who are grieving. Those who work directly with grieving children can offer a perspective of the impact of grief on children. It was the researchers hope that the camp staff could also offer a perspective as to the unique experience of participating in a grief camp.

Consistent with qualitative methodology bracketing is an important aspect of the qualitative research process (Moustakas, 1994). In bracketing, the researchers offer their relationship to the topic in order for readers to gain a greater understanding of their context. As a Couples and Family Therapist (CFT), I (TB) have treated many clients dealing with some aspect of grief and witnessed how devastating it can be to both the individual and the family system. When I was sixteen a dear friend of mine died in a car

accident and it preoccupied my teenage life. I was saddened and did not know how to manage the myriad of emotions that followed. I felt alone, isolated, and as though nobody could understand.

This changed nearly four years later when I volunteered at a children's grief camp for the first time. That year I was assigned as a counselor and met brave young women willing to talk about their experiences of a mother's suicide, a father's death to a long-term disease, and various other tragic deaths. There was something unique happening at this camp that I had been unable to find in my every day life.

I have since played many roles at that same camp but have always been curious about what makes camp such a meaningful experience for both the campers and the staff. I have heard camp staff discuss how "miraculous" camp is but struggle to articulate what it is *exactly* that makes it such a momentous ritual in their life. Staff members return year after year in order to be a part of this event and bring others to take part in the ritual.

As I have grown professionally as a therapist, I have witnessed the intense need for children and teens to have an opportunity to connect with others about their grief. It is evident that a connection to others with similar experiences is part of the healing process. What I have found to be distinctive about this camp is the opportunity for children and teens to express themselves in a supportive community. In addition, this camp offers therapeutic outlets, and the opportunities to acquire coping skills. Whether they choose art, music, play, or other activities, there is something for *each* child.

I have often wondered, do others see camp in the same beneficial way as I do? And if so, what is it about camp that makes such an impact on the staff and children involved? These questions led to the design of the current study exploring the overall experience of participation in this camp. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine, from a phenomenological perspective, the experiences of staff in this overnight four-day grief camp.

## Method

The qualitative methods employed in this study are rooted in a phenomenological tradition. The role of phenomenology is to understand the lived experiences of individuals who share the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). For this study, the intention of using phenomenology was to explore the meaning staff members give to their camp experience. The procedure for data analysis follows the steps outlined by Moustakas (1994) for phenomenological data analysis. In the initial analysis, the researcher finds significant statements in the interviews reflecting the participant's experiences surrounding the phenomenon (horizontalization). Next, the researcher groups these statements into meaning units (textural description) and begins to develop categories and themes. Finally, a description of how the phenomenon was experienced is established from these themes and an overall description of the essence of the experience is constructed.

## Grief Camp

This particular camp is set amongst a landscape of beautiful trees, a serene lake, and a mountainous background. Camp houses up to 45 children and teens overnight for 4

days. The program originated in the early nineties, when a hospice nurse recognized the lack of support and resources available for grieving children in this Pacific Northwest community. The camp was designed to offer activities to assist children in expressing grief in a fun and supportive environment. Children spend the week at camp doing activities such as art, drama, music, sand play, memorial rituals, storytelling, outdoor challenges, and swimming. Each day is designed to open dialogue about the process of grief and to normalize the feelings associated with this process. On a given day, each child has the opportunity to participate in activities while building relationships with other campers. Essentially, the overall mission of camp is to encourage attendees to express themselves in whatever way makes sense for them while also integrating fun activities. The role of camp staff is to provide support and guidance throughout the process while also having distinct roles in the overall operation. For this year's camp, staff was comprised of two camp co-directors, 25 counselors, five counselors-in-training, one staff specialist, one nurse, one doctor, two art specialists, one music therapy specialist, one story room specialist, two sand therapy specialists, one adventure challenge specialist, one outdoor games coordinator, one lifeguard, and one staff massage therapist. Essentially, camp operates on a 1:1 ratio of campers to staff. During the summer of this study, there were 30 female and 15 male campers with ages ranging from six to 17 years old ( $M=10.89$ ). Campers had experienced varying deaths of loved ones including dad ( $n=20$ ), mom ( $n=2$ ), brother ( $n=6$ ), sister ( $n=8$ ), grandpa ( $n=3$ ), or multiple deaths ( $n=6$ ). Examples of multiple deaths would be both mom and dad, or dad and brother.

## **Participants**

The participants in this study were the staff and volunteers of an annual overnight four-day children's grief camp located in the Pacific Northwest. The study was approved by the Courageous Kid's organization and the Texas Tech University Institutional Review Board prior to commencing. Data was drawn from in-depth interviews with eight staff with one-year prior experience at camp. It was mandatory for all participants to be 18 years of age to meet human subject's criteria. Participants were recruited by an informal oral invitation at the initial camp orientation dinner. Anyone interested in participating were encouraged to contact the lead researcher during the week of camp.

Participants included four females and four males, all self-identified as Caucasian, and ranging in age from 18-59. The participants had varying levels of experience with grief and bereavement. Three participants were returning campers, who have now become volunteers. The other five participants returned to camp with over five years of experience. Participants had diverse occupations outside of camp including school counselor, retired parole officer, teacher, fundraiser, and student. Participants also played different roles at camp including cabin counselor (three), staff specialist, camp director, art specialist, music therapist, and adventure challenge specialist.

## **Procedure**

Once participants expressed interest to the lead researcher, and screened for inclusion criteria, private interviews were scheduled in a confidential location.

Interviews were conducted on site and lasted approximately 90 minutes and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Each participant was informed about the nature of the study and signed consent prior to the interview. Participants chose their own pseudonyms for the purposes of confidentiality in the study. All eight interviews were facilitated by the lead researcher. Data was stored in audio files in a password protected computer that was stored in a locked office.

The researchers took several steps to strengthen the trustworthiness of the results of the study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), any qualitative study must establish trustworthiness by selecting specific methods to address possible threats to the credibility of the research. The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative study is to support the argument that the research findings are “worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). First, the researchers consulted at every step of the research process, known as peer debriefing (Creswell, 2007). These discussions created an opportunity for consultation on the research process and collaboration of ideas. Second, the lead researcher had prolonged engagement in the field (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as she had been a part of the camp staff for several years prior to the study and has knowledge regarding the camp’s culture. Third, the lead researcher kept a reflexive journal from the study’s inception through the writing process. The intent of a journal is to capture the ongoing process and ensure transferability of the study. The lead researcher followed the suggestions of Patton (2002) and also included thick descriptions of the setting and reactions throughout the reflection process. Fourth, to address issues of dependability and confirmability, the researchers also employed an internal and external auditor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Finally, the process of member checking was utilized in order to establish the credibility of the data as Lincoln and Guba state that this is “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Member checking documents were sent to participants and asked if the data accurately depicted their experience. In all cases, participants replied affirmatively.

### **Instrumentation**

All participants answered brief oral demographic questions prior to the interview. Demographic questions were aimed to understand the participants’ age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, and overall experience at camp. An in-depth interview was conducted with each participant including the following grand-tour question: What is your experience of being a part of this camp? In addition, six planned follow-up questions were employed. Sample follow-up questions included: What do you see as the overall benefits of camp? How has camp impacted your own grief experiences? See Appendix for a list of interview questions.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. The lead researcher reviewed the transcripts and notes, summarized the transcriptions, and identified emerging themes and sub-themes within each group and then across groups. Following initial review, both researchers discussed overall categories and themes from the study results. Participants were asked to voluntarily serve as “member checkers” for

their interviews. The initial analysis (with all identifying information removed), as well as the emerging themes and sub-themes, were sent to each participant for their review and feedback. Feedback from participants was incorporated into the final results.

## Results

The questions asked of research participants were utilized to organize the data into categories and then within those themes are indicated. Two major categories emerged from the data, *connection to others* and *independence*. Participants expressed a significant need for both campers and themselves to connect with others and be validated in their grief emotions. Essentially, the ability to *connect* to others was imperative in the healing process. Consequently, participants discussed the strong need to experience grief with some *independence*. Participants articulated that grief looks and feels different for everyone

### Category I: Connection to Others

Participants expressed the need for campers to develop connections with others in order to validate their emotions and to understand they are not alone. The participants also felt it was important for campers to have the opportunity to relate to others with significant deaths in their lives.

**Theme I: Validates emotions.** Six participants discussed the role camp plays in encouraging campers to feel sad, to cry, or feel whatever they need to feel. Participants indicated that camp provides a parallel process. As they provide validation to the campers they are also providing it to each other. Listed below are representative quotes:

“It’s okay to be sad, and it’s okay to talk about it and have a tear in your eye.”

“They’re with campers who are feeling sad about this, and they’re feeling sad so they cry, which is wonderful, and they get in an atmosphere where that’s okay.”

“It’s the validation and that you’re not, you know, a ‘weirdo’ or you’re not, you know, this outcast. That there are people who have shared an experience like this.”

“It’s learning to know that wherever you are and however you feel it’s okay and to not be hard on yourself and not to be self-critical about it.”

**Theme II: Shared experience.** Five participants stated that camp provided the ability for children to be able to share their experience of grief with others who can relate. Some indicated how sharing the grief experience with others was particularly helpful for the campers, as well as for themselves. The participants discussed comfort felt by being



surrounded by other people who have experienced similar things. The following quotes are representations of participant statements:

“It’s this inevitable feeling of comfort when they [campers] are around other people who can relate like that.”

“The chance to get away from everything that’s going on and hang out with other kids that are going through the same [thing].”

“It’s felt really good to be like in an area with other people who have experienced similar things.”

“I’m surrounded by all of these people that are going through and feeling a lot of the same things I am.”

## **Category II: Independence**

The need for *independence* by grieving children was the next theme expressed by staff. Participants expressed the need for children to have independence in their grief or the flexibility to find their own path. Participants articulated the need for campers to personalize their grieving process by finding their own outlets their own ways of managing their grief.

**Theme I: Grief is unique.** Seven participants spoke specifically about how they see grief as a unique experience and how “it’s different for everybody.” There cannot be a single definition of grief because it manifests itself uniquely. Below are representative quotes:

“There is no one complete 100 percent truth you can say about...the process of grieving. There’s no complete way you can place [grief] in the box and be like this is what happens, because it is so different for every single person.”

“I’ve heard about the seven stages of grief for your process and the general trends but, you know, I’ve found it can just jump all around.”

“When you try to group it like that [stages] and put it into...a chronological thing, I mean it just – it doesn’t – I feel like it misses the fundamental importance of each child’s unique way of dealing with things.”

“Everybody just does [grieves] differently. “

“It’s different for everybody and so to understand that what you’re going through is going to look different than what everybody else is going through.”

**Theme II: Personal ritual.** Participants expressed how camp creates a way for campers and staff to connect each year. Seven participants spoke directly about how it opens a way for them (campers and staff) to connect to their grief in a different way than when they do in their everyday life. It was clear from the interviews that camp represented a time set apart for participants to personally process the deaths in their life. Staff members stated:

“It’s the one time of the year where I don’t - I guess basically force me not to ignore, you know, feelings about the death of my mother.”

“I think that being at camp is the one place where I allow myself to really cry about it still, because it really is right at the surface when you’re here.”

“It’s like looking at yourself in snapshots every year. This is where I am.”

“You just get excited to revisit something that sometimes you haven’t actually visited for a whole entire year and you’ve returned to it.”

“I think that being at camp is the one place where I allow myself to really cry about it still.”

**Theme III: Diverse outlets.** Different types of people and different activities seem to make a great impact on campers. Five participants agreed that camp provides a diverse group of people for campers to relate to and also provides different types of activities for campers to express themselves. Participants stated:

“You have all these different voices of experience that [range] from all these backgrounds and ...it makes it so no matter what the need of the camper is– they’ll find what they’re looking for.”

“A staff who is able to reach out to all different kids in all different ways to let them know they’re supported [is validating].”

“Kids grieve like adults do and they just need their own way. And I think we have those different avenues here.”

## Discussion

This study provides an initial look into the experiences of staff who have worked closely with children’s grief for several years at a four day residential grief camp. For the staff at this grief camp, there is a balance between the role of *connection to others* and *independence* in the grieving process. Participants discussed each as having importance in the overall camp experience. As Figure 1 outlines, this balance may be facilitated by a grief camp experience and may be helpful in the process of a child’s grief.

The category of *connection to others* incorporates the themes of *shared experience* and *validation*. According to staff members, it is important for children to be around others who have experienced something similar. Further, it is also important to have the emotions attached to the death validated. Secondly, the category of *independence* includes the themes of *grief is unique*, *personal ritual*, and *diverse outlets*. Participants expressed how grief is different for everyone as each person has a unique experience. In addition, participants expressed how camp becomes a yearly ritual, which offers diverse outlets to express grief.

Although this is a preliminary look into the experience of staff who work at a four-day grief camp for children, it offers interesting ideas about grief. The study fits within a growing body of literature that encourages interventions for children and adolescents dealing with the loss associated with the death of a loved one. Suitable interventions are needed in order to provide children with the necessary tools to manage the varying emotions associated with their grief. Grief camps are a viable option and should be available for children in different regions throughout the country. Furthermore, as the results of the study revealed, staff who work at camps such as this may also benefit personally from the experience. Although camp may create a unique atmosphere, it is useful to discuss how elements of camp can be clinically applied in other settings. The results of this study suggest the following clinical implications.

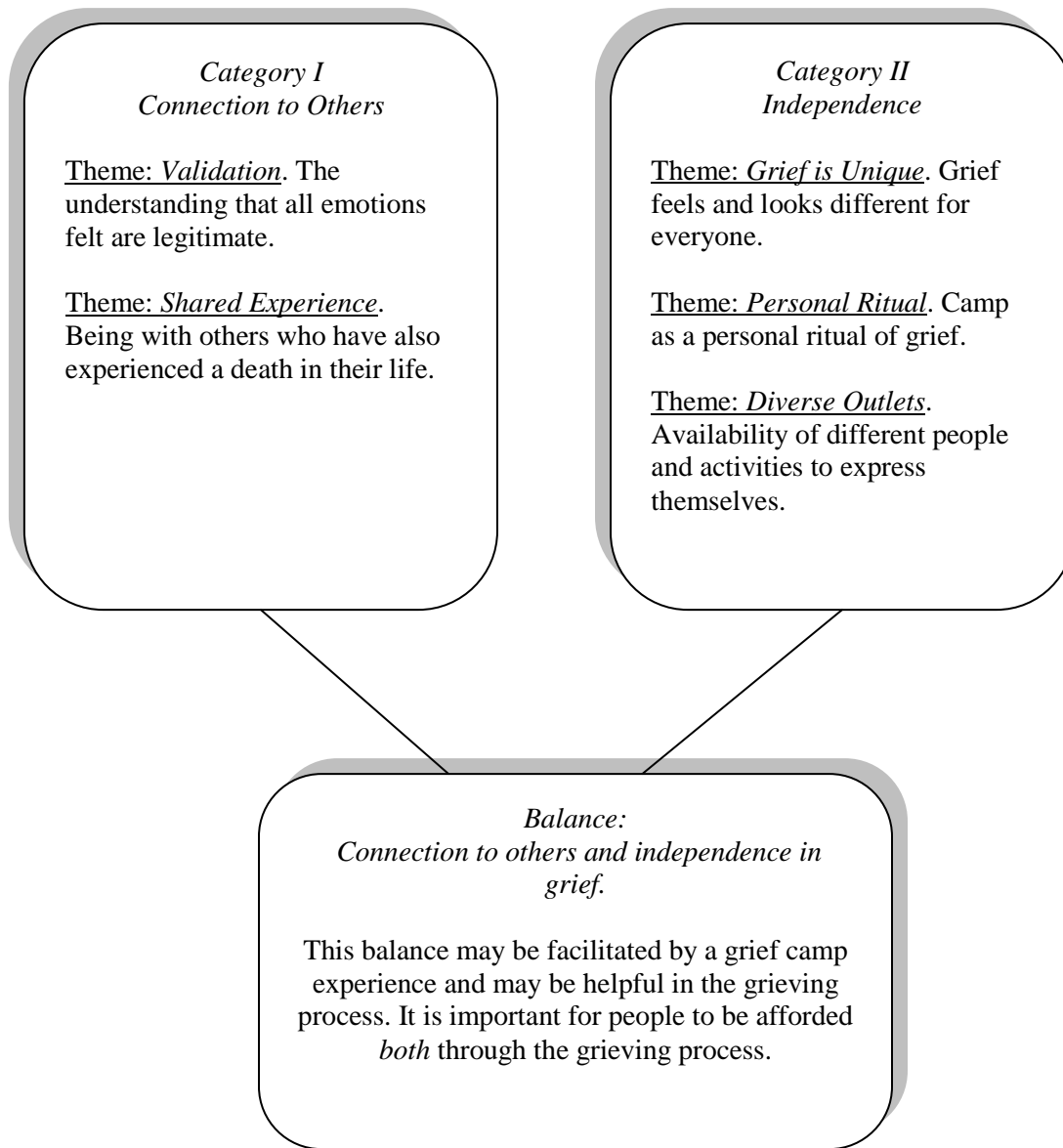
### **Clinical Implications**

First, grief should be understood as a unique process and does not manifest itself in linear stages. Though some children may experience similar emotions, and certainly may experience similar deaths, it does not mean their overall experience is the same. Just as Goldman (2004) points out, a child's experience of grief is going to look different and feel different than the next. Clinicians should take a curious role, and have children express what their grief means to them rather than expect their grief to follow a certain pattern.

Second, participants spoke about how camp provides a personal ritual for them during the year. In clinical work with grieving children, it is important to explore how a person memorializes the deaths in their life. Understanding whether a person has a grief ritual and how that ritual plays a role in their life could be a way to engage in discussions regarding their grief experience thereby promoting healing.

Third, it is necessary for clinicians to be aware of the balance between a connection to others and independence in the grieving process. Clinicians can play an integral role in validating and empowering children and families in navigating the journey of grief. Being cognizant of the balance may be a catalyst to discussions about finding connectedness and developing independence throughout the process.

And finally, grief camps are still rarely discussed in the literature, but when explored, beneficial results ensue (Creed et al., 2001; Goldman, 2005; Loy, 2000). Communities can further enhance their ability to respond to children dealing with the tragic loss of a loved one by providing a camp experience.

Figure 1. *Presentation of Results*

## Future Research

Future research is needed to explore children's grief and the benefits of grief camps. Given the rich experiences of the participants in this study, specific studies' exploring the impact of grief camps on children is promising. Follow-up studies could focus on whether the experiences of the children attending such camps match the assumed benefits outlined by the staff. These studies could take on the form of qualitative studies designed to more specifically explore a child's experience of grief. Or, future studies could utilize pre-post design to measure the impact of camp on a child's

adjustment to the death of a loved one. In addition, the parallel benefit to those professionals who work with grieving children should be explored.

### Limitations

There are limitations of this study worthy of discussion. First, this study is an attempt to capture the experiences of only those staff members who volunteered for the study and may not reflect those who would not readily volunteer. The broader application of what emerged from this study is in need of further investigation. Thus, findings should be viewed in the context of these staff members at this camp. Also, as with any qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the primary research instrument. Though stringent steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the data, personal biases are natural in qualitative research and may have shaped the results and presentation of the findings.

In conclusion, this research explores the essential questions I had about a particular grief camp and what role it plays in the lives of those who work there. The expressions of staff interviewed for this study reflect my own experiences. My connections to others who have experienced similar deaths and being validated by them have made a difference in my own grief process. Furthermore, I have had to find my own independence in grief through rituals and through other diverse outlets. Grief camp has been an essential element in my process of healing. As a mental health professional, I continue to hope that children and adults alike will find the balance in their own grief journey in a camp experience or other appropriate therapeutic encounters.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Questions**

Grand tour question: What is your overall experience at camp?

Follow-up questions: What do you see as the benefits of camp?

What are the reasons you returned to camp?

What have you learned about grief from being part of this camp?

What do you notice about the campers throughout the week?

How has your experience of camp impacted your own grief experience (if applies)?

What are the similarities of characteristics do staff members hold?

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### **Author Note**

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Special thanks to Courageous Kids Camp for their cooperation and vision. The authors acknowledge Brandy Lucas, Ph.D., Jessica Loehndorf Hutchison, M.Ed., and Melissa Kimball for their editorial review and constructive input.

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### **Article Citation**

Brown, T. B., & Kimball, T. G. (2012). Residential grief camps: An initial phenomenological study of staff perspectives. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(1), 78-91. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17-1/brown.pdf>

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